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THE KINGDOM OF GOD AS A DEMOCRATIC IDEAL

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Many Christians are today ready to affirm that Christianity stands for the Brotherhood of Man. For many centuries, Christians when they "said their prayers" have been accustomed to repeat the words "Thy Kingdom come" ostensibly as expressing their great desire or one of their great desires. In the preaching of Jesus, the "Kingdom of God" was apparently the great central theme, and there is in recent years a revival of interest in this phrase and of study as to its meaning. And it is being largely used nowadays as a term descriptive of the ideal state of society, in which the Brotherhood of Man shall be realized. We have to consider the question whether or to what extent the phrase "Kingdom of God" and the ideas naturally associated with it may suitably be used to indicate the religion of the Brotherhood of Man or a religion through which the Brotherhood of Man may be gradually established.

As a standard by which to test any forms or conceptions of religion which may be considered as suitable to usher in and maintain the brotherhood of man and the real democracy of which it is, we have asserted, the necessary spirit, we must at the start, set clearly before us the two absolute essentials of such a real democracy. The first, we may call the *principle of individual responsibility*. The second is the *good will motive*. In a democracy every mature individual is to make his decisions as to what it is right and wise for himself and others to do, *by the power of his own mind*, in the light of such knowledge and experience as he shall have gained for himself.

There must be no outer compulsion of any sort upon him, as to his decisions. You may, if you like, apply to him the principle "the King can do no wrong," only that is to be applied to his thoughts and decisions, not to his overt acts. The concrete expression of this responsibility is in his ballot, and if this be kept in mind it will help to make the principle clear—almost self-evident. Each citizen is to have the right to vote as he thinks good, with no bribe, nor threat of any sort of welfare or ill-fare to warp his decision. He must yield in his *actions* to the plurality of judgments as to what is good, obeying the laws which he may often consider unwise. But he must not be limited in any way in his right to form his own opinion about those laws or policies under which he must live for a time, and to express that opinion in an orderly, legal way, doubtless in speech and press, but particularly in the ballot.

It is to be recognized that the acceptance of this general principle for one's self involves with logically absolute necessity its extension to all others who will accept it and live by it. That is, if I demand and accept the right to express my mind and share in determining the government and laws under which I live, unthreatened by any policeman or thug, with no bribe to pull me and no economic penalty (except such as would follow from the nature of the policy I advocate, itself) to push me, then I must grant the same freedom to everyone else who will accept it. This means that no power of soldier, constable, or court, nor of actual or threatened strike, nor of offered promotion, demotion, or dismissal may be used against me or by me against some one else, to make him say, "Yes," when his mind says, "No," or to make him vote "No" when his mind votes "Yes," so long as he and I are willing to abide by the result, until we can secure its change by the same democratic method in which it was determined. This is the principle of the "universal, equal, secret suffrage" demanded in democratic countries. As a theory of government it implies

that, given the opportunity and responsibility, every man or, at least the large majority of men, will in time come to see what is wise and good in the matter of such human relations as can be controlled or influenced by government, and that society will be better off, altogether, when governed by the wisdom which has been reached by a majority of its members, than by that which has been reached by a smaller number, who would therefore impose their will by *force* upon the majority, since the majority did not consent to their will.

The second principle absolutely essential to successful democratic government is the one to which we have already given considerable attention, the principle of the good will motive. Only when each citizen, each voter, therefore, each ruler, seeks the welfare of all concerned, that is, today at least, of all humanity, can there be any assurance that he will use the power of the ballot, the power of his share in the government in the interests of the governed. We have perhaps said enough, for the present about this principle. It is of the first importance that we keep in mind these two principles of individual responsibility and the good will motive, in judging any form of religion as to its compatibility with or value to democracy.

The Christian interest in the "Kingdom of God" dates, naturally, from the first century of our era. The hope of the Jews of the time of Jesus, was that the Roman yoke should be thrown off, and that Palestine should become an independent, prosperous, and glorious kingdom, with a glory similar to but even greater than that which was reputed to have been enjoyed under the reigns of David and Solomon. The hope of such independence and prosperity was the most vital part of the religion of the Jews at this time. It was by the power of God that the foreign yoke was to be broken, and it was his "Messiah" (Christ or Anointed One) who was to lead the nation in its revolution and to rule it as the representative of God.

Needless to say, the theory and ideal of modern democracy was unknown in Palestine in the first century. The consent of all worthy Jews to the reign of the God-anointed king, in the line of David, was, of course, assumed. But there was no thought that the power by which the king should carry on his government would be other than that of military and police force, wherever there might be any objection to the will of the ruler, except as supernatural or magical force might be added by God to the usual human forces at the disposal of ordinary monarchs.

In the Jewish thought of this time there is no trace of the principle that "governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed." The Jewish political theory was that of the theocracy, with a visible representative of God anointed by his authority and appointed by him, seated on the throne, and exercising, without dispute, so far as other men were concerned, the royal powers deputed by the invisible God. We shall probably be safe in saying that such a theocracy, in one or another modification, has always been the theoretical form of the monarchies of earth until the modern days of constitutional or limited monarchies, and it has persisted even in them. Probably all the kings left on earth today make at least formal claim in law or in title to reign *Dei Gratia*, to be vicars or regents of the unseen (if not absent) God.

Whether or not a religion with a theocratic theory of civil government is favorable to the development of democracy will evidently depend on the faith held with regard to the nature of the god and his relations with men. In so far as the ruling deity governs men in accordance with what we have called the principle of individual responsibility, he will develop democratic tendencies and powers among his worshipers. In so far as he rules men by outward compulsion, and reveals his will by outward authority of some sort, not subject to the criticism of the mind of the individual, the effect will be

anti-democratic. Democracy, we have seen, requires freedom of judgment for every individual. Only the immanent god, expressing his truth and will through the mind and conscience of the individual is a friend to democracy, so far as this first standard is concerned.

The second question about the relation of theocratic faith to the development of democracy is concerned with the degree in which it promotes the good will motive among men. Logically, doubtless, it might be shown that the principle of individual responsibility is a form for thought and action, and an empty form, without the good will, which is the only suitable substance for the expression of that form. It might also be maintained that good will without the form which we have described under the term individual responsibility is likely to be ineffective, if not actually subversive of that which it would promote, i.e., the welfare of men. Yet in practice the one or the other may be emphasized and developed without a fully parallel process in the other.

We may say that the principle of individual responsibility had been recognized and taught by some of the greatest of the prophets of Israel, but its meaning and implications formed no essential part of the popular hope for the Kingdom of God, in the time of Jesus. So also of the good will motive. It also may be dimly discerned in some of the noblest thoughts of the prophets, but before Jesus we cannot find any explicit teaching that one should love *all* men, and certainly such universal human love did not flow from the popular conception of the nature of God or of his will, in the first century.

Jesus, as we have noted, used the Kingdom of God as his central theme. Like John the Baptist, we are told that he commenced his ministry with the message than which no other could have been so welcome or so exciting in his day: "Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand." His subsequent life and teaching have been and are today interpreted in two radically different ways. For our purposes, we may call the

one school of interpreters the autocratic and the other the democratic school, according as the interpretation assumes or finds that the principles of Jesus' life and teaching are those belonging to autocracy or democracy.

The autocratic school holds that Jesus actually came to the earth to be substantially what the Jews were expecting, only much more, to be the divine representative of God—the visible presence of God himself, on the earth, to rule *by force* not only the Jews and Palestine but also all the rest of the earth. Most of this school would perhaps hold that for some reason it was not intended to carry out the whole of this program during the first earthly life of Jesus. They would acknowledge, certainly, that the use of external force to compel submission to “his claims” was abjured during his life in past history, but that element of autocracy is soon to be supplied. The return of Jesus to the earth to reign with external power, destroying his enemies and promoting his friends, has been expected every year from the first century down to the present, and the faith that he may come now at any hour to reign as the Divine Kaiser, and bring order out of the chaos and happiness out of the misery in which the world now groans, is passionately believed and advocated by large numbers of those who call themselves Christians, and, of course, the only orthodox Christians upon the earth.

But this school, while acknowledging a conspicuous absence of any attempt to compel submission by outward force during his historical life upon the earth, would find the other principal elements of autocracy even in that life. For these interpreters, Jesus was absolute in his power and authority to reveal truth and to legislate for mankind. Any utterance that he made is to be accepted as true without any question as to how it meets the ordinary tests of truth available to us today, and to question any statement attributed to him in the Four Gospels, with the possibility in mind of disputing its truth, is nothing short of blasphemy.

Likewise Jesus had absolute authority to speak for God as to what was right and wrong, to legislate for humanity. If he said that to divorce except for adultery was to commit adultery, that settles the matter forever, and if he said that people should not resist evil, but should make violence easy for the violent and robbery for the thief, then all war and all police activity become automatically wicked. The moral judgment or conscience of the individual has nothing to do in any instance in which Jesus has thus laid down the law but to apply it most simply and directly.

There are, of course, a great many who would be inconsistent in their interpretation of Jesus' authority. They would hold that Jesus taught nothing absurd, that we must try to find a reasonable meaning for his teaching, and are bound to obey it, only as we find such a reasonable meaning. Many, for instance, would abjure pacifism, while at the same time acknowledging the absolute authority of Jesus in all matters upon which he spoke. They would find a reasonable meaning to his injunction to "turn the other cheek" and to give up both cloak and coat—a teaching not as to the particular action to be followed in all circumstances, but as to the spirit of love that is to actuate under all circumstances. But these same interpreters would not admit any such right of seeking a reasonable meaning of the teaching upon divorce. That is divine legislation not subject to human questioning. So if Jesus said that he who should believe and be baptized should be saved, the baptism has the same authority as the faith, and no reason or experience has any weight to the contrary.

If it be asked how one is to be assured that Jesus had such absolute authority, the Protestant answer is that the divine nature and authority of Jesus were demonstrated by events inexplicable on the ground of known laws and processes of nature, preceding, during, and following the life of Jesus upon the earth. Although the most of these works, familiarly known as miracles, were benevolent in intention and helpful

in result, that is only a harmonious incident. The valuation of these events as proofs of divine authority depends entirely upon the belief that they had no adequate cause except "divine power," that they have no place in the laws or regular processes of nature, and that we could not say that under the same circumstances they would happen again, unless we include as the principal circumstance the will of God to act directly and without any regular *means*. To use the technical term for such phenomena in religion and anthropology, the proof of the authority of Jesus was his magical powers, and the magical events associated with his life. The Catholic answer to the question, What is the evidence for the absolute authority of Jesus? would doubtless be: the word of the church is your sufficient proof. And the Catholic church does not require either to go back to the historical Jesus, or to await his return as the divine Autocrat in order to have the benefits of his absolute authority. It holds that the authority of Jesus was delegated to the apostles, especially Peter and his successors and that absolute power to declare truth or to legislate for men abides in the priestly authorities of the church. The layman has individual responsibility only that he may deliver it up to the church, and thereafter use it, in so far as permitted by the church, under its direction.

The democratic school of interpreters of Jesus holds that he repudiated the autocratic ideal of the Kingdom of God, as a political organization to be ruled by force, by a human or *quasi*-human king as God's representative. He believed, apparently, that he was to be in some sense, doubtless in the real or right sense, the Messiah, anointed by God to proclaim and establish his Kingdom, but he steadfastly refused, perhaps even to the end of his life, either to claim to be the Messiah or to acknowledge definitely its proper application to him, because it meant for the people, even for his disciples, such an earthly autocrat as he refused to be, for he recognized that such a king could not establish by autocratic methods the

Kingdom of God. He taught, then, a spiritual kingdom in which God's reign was to be realized through the submission of the individual to the will of God, his inner loyalty to the laws and purposes of God. Jesus recognized and maintained the principle of individual responsibility to the full. He required the individual to make his own moral judgments and act, not according to any written code of laws of the past, nor any new enactments which he himself made, but according to God's voice in his mind and heart as expressed in the best thought and feeling of his own consciousness. To be sure, Jesus did not teach this principle explicitly. But his whole life and teaching was an expression of this principle.

Jesus said that he came to fulfil the traditional law of the Jews as embodied in what we most commonly call the Old Testament. But he showed what he meant by fulfilling, when he sought out and taught the fundamental moral principles contained within it, and insisted upon action according to these principles even to the contravention of the letter of the law. This attitude is shown clearly, the democratic school would hold, in the passage in Matt. 5:21-48 and particularly in his dealing with Sabbath laws and laws of ceremonial purity. It is shown in his declaration of the Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12) as the essence of the "law and the prophets" and again in his assertion that the "law and the prophets" hang upon the two great commandments of love to God and to neighbor (Matt. 22:38-40).

The democratic interpreters would further point out that Jesus not only refused to be "a judge and divider," or to lead a revolt against the government or to defend himself by force of arms, but regarded the ambition to assume the power and functions of an earthly king as a temptation to be sternly resisted. This is described in picturesque imagery in the account of the Devil offering him all the kingdoms of this world, if he would "fall down and worship him." The acceptance of autocratic power would have been for Jesus worship of the Devil.

Most significant in opposition to the position that Jesus claimed absolute authority to declare truth and to promulgate moral law, and that this authority of Jesus was demonstrated by inexplicable events or miracles, is the attitude which Jesus himself maintained with regard to his authority and especially with regard to confirmation by miracles. When the Pharisees came "seeking of him a sign from heaven" according to probably the oldest account we have [(Mark 8:11, 12), "He sighed deeply in his spirit and saith, Why doth this generation seek a sign? Verily I say unto you, There shall no sign be given unto this generation." Whatever may be the reason for and significance and truth of the parallel readings in Matthew and Luke, referring to signs of the weather, and the sign of Jonah, the fact remains that a miraculous sign was refused as a confirmation of his authority. Of possibly greater importance is the account in Mark 11:12-33, and parallels in Matthew and Luke, according to which Jesus answered the question of the chief priests and scribes as to his authority, with the question to them about the authority of John the Baptist. When they evaded an answer to this question he refused the answer to theirs, evidently because his authority rested upon the same foundation as that of John's. No miracle is narrated of John, but the appeal of John's preaching to mind and conscience was sufficient evidence that he was a prophet or messenger from God. The evidence for the authority of Jesus was precisely of the same sort. His authority was that of the truth which he spoke and the good which he taught and did; and of that every honest man was the competent judge.

One further argument would be offered by the democratic school from the story of the temptation. One of the temptations was to demonstrate his supernatural authority or divine sonship by casting himself down from a "pinnacle of the temple." That he recognized this impulse to acquire prestige and a following by a supernatural sign, to be a temptation to do evil, and resisted it, seems to be a further proof of his

recognition that his authority was purely that of the appeal which his words and life should make to the moral judgment of the individual.

The answer of the democratic school to two principal objections to its interpretation of Jesus, might well be noted here. One objection is that the Fourth Gospel does represent Jesus as a divine autocrat, and appeal to the confirmation of his authority through miraculous signs. This would be freely admitted, but the reply would be that this Gospel differs radically from the earlier three in just these respects, that both cannot be correct, that the Fourth Gospel is a product probably of the early decades of the second century and represents the development of Christology up to that time, in certain circles, rather than the real facts about Jesus.

The second objection is that while Jesus, in his historical life, undoubtedly did refrain from autocratic aims and methods, he expected and taught that he would presently return "in the clouds, with power and great glory." To this it is replied that the reputed utterances of Jesus on this subject, in the synoptics, are few and of uncertain meaning, and that those which seem more definitely to promise a return of Jesus "in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" may be rather the reflection of the faith which arose in connection with the post-crucifixion visions of Jesus than a true account of his own utterances. Or it may be that Jesus accepted the version of the messianic hope, current in his time, that God would soon interpose in a miraculous manner, to bring to a sudden end the present age, and remedy existing wrongs and establish his Kingdom in outward, visible form, by his supernatural power. Beyond a doubt, something of this sort was ardently expected by the early Christian church, mistakenly expected, at least as to date, for the reappearance of Christ was confidently looked for within the lifetime of some of those who had seen and heard Jesus before his death. At best, the words of Jesus on this subject, given in the Gospels, are very few, and difficult of interpretation. The democratic school would admit

the possibility that Jesus himself may have mistakenly accepted some of the messianic ideals of his time, but point to the great weight of his unmistakable teaching of the principles of the spiritual kingdom, which harmonize completely with the democratic principle of individual responsibility.

Before leaving this contrasting of the rival autocratic and democratic interpretations of Jesus, we may observe that those students whom we have called the democratic school, are also properly called the modern critical school. They endeavor to develop religion in the full light of modern science and present-day conditions, and feel not only free but required, in order to a proper understanding and use of the Bible, to use the historical method of study and interpretation, without any attempt to accept all traditional views of authorship, authenticity, and date of the various writings, or to harmonize the statements and doctrines of each with all of the rest. The autocratic school, on the other hand, is also the traditionalist school, holding to the theory of the "deposit of faith" or the "faith once for all delivered to the saints," probably in the first century of our era, general accepting traditional interpretations, and views of authorship, integrity, date, etc., and regarding the so-called historical study or "higher criticism" of the Scriptures as impious and invalid. They are likely to be skeptical toward many of the conclusions of modern science and research, and to hold that the religion of the apostles of Jesus is the ideal and perfect religion, fully and perfectly adapted to all the needs of humanity in all time, subject therefore to no modification or change.

In considering these rival interpretations of the life and teaching of Jesus, in their relation to democracy, we have looked particularly at their respective positions with regard to the principle of individual responsibility. We must also notice briefly their attitude toward the good will motive.

Without doubt the autocratic school has generally accepted in theory the teaching of Jesus that the law of love is the

fundamental law of God, and tried to teach the loving life and extend its influence, by precept and example. Its deficiency in this regard has arisen from the fact that it has made other principles and motives of equal or greater importance, and has violated the law of love or acted contrary to the good will motive in many cases. To make belief in the authority of the pope or the church or the Scriptures or the value of the sacraments as important or more important for the individual than belief in the life of love, is, of course, to minimize the latter. One may say that practically all of the Christianity of the past up to a hundred years ago or less, has been that of the autocratic school, in one or another of its forms. And we look in vain for any of the great historic symbols, creeds, or confessions of faith which declares that good will to all men is absolutely essential to the welfare—the salvation—of the individual and of humanity.

This good will has not been taught as an essential of salvation, but various other things, all of them belonging to the general system of autocracy, have been declared essential. The general, conscious influence of historical Christianity down to the most recent times, has therefore been favorable to autocracy and hostile to democracy, in its denial of the principle of individual responsibility, and its neglect of and action contrary to the good will motive. Nevertheless under the pressure of the needs and conditions of humanity, and of the truth and value of the love-principle within Christianity, however officially neglected, democracy has been developing under the shadow—often the protecting and often the blighting shadow—of Christianity.

We noted in passing, that the democratic school recognized Jesus' teaching of the law of love, or the good will motive as of fundamental importance, both in his own thought and in its value for humanity. We may say that the whole tendency of this modern school is to make and keep this good will motive central in religion and in its interpretation of Jesus.

The historical content of the phrase "Kingdom of God" has varied much, but that term has, naturally, always been interpreted in harmony with the general principles and ideals of the theologians of the time and group. It has been understood to mean a form of organization of society and of divine rule in it, of Palestine, or of the whole of humanity on this earth, or to denote the organized church within humanity, or a condition to be realized not upon earth at all but in heaven. In most of these ideas God has been thought of as the Almighty Autocrat, and human autocratic methods have been used by church and state to express and enforce the divine rule. The democratic school of Christianity would hold that God truly rules only in so far as the individual acts from the good will motive, and freely decides for himself how he ought to act to express this motive. It repudiates autocracy altogether, even divine autocracy.

In summarizing the foregoing discussion we may say that all principles of religion which maintain the existence of any authority outside of the individual, to which he should submit *unconditionally*, are to that extent anti-democratic. Such principles are government by a hierarchy not chosen by or responsible to the laity; salvation through the magical influence of the sacraments; submission to "the church" however organized, as an authority for truth and morals superior to and not subject to the criticism of the individual; acceptance of a body of scripture as giving complete and infallible information and direction in regard to religious and moral truth and life; belief in the imminent return of Jesus to be an almighty and all-wise autocrat, destroying or coercing all who fail to submit entirely to his will, and abolishing, since supplanting, all spiritual movements for the redemption of humanity and political movements for the establishment of democracy. Out of the mass of literature on this subject, two very timely and valuable articles in the *Biblical World* for July, 1919, may be referred to, the one on "Premillennialism," by H. F. Rall

and the other on "Making Christianity Safe for Democracy" by G. B. Smith.

The "Kingdom of God" we may believe, was a democratic conception in the mind of Jesus, but it has been largely an autocratic conception from his day to ours. It is again being given a democratic interpretation by the "democratic school" of interpreters to which we have referred, and, more or less, doubtless, by many who do not fully accept the principles and conclusions of this school. It may be doubted whether this term will be abandoned or supplanted in the foreseeable future to any appreciable extent by even the most democratic. But in view of the fact that the term "kingdom" inevitably suggests autocracy and when used in religion an autocratic God, it might be well for friends of democracy occasionally to emphasize the democratic interpretation as contrasted with the other, and perhaps to use other phrases more obviously democratic to make clear their use of this famous term, so dear to us from a thousand associations.

But let us remember that we cannot get a democracy, or indeed a satisfactory condition of humanity, without good will freely expressed. Such free good will cannot be obtained by force from the outside of any form, divine or human. The spirit of love will never rule either by magic or machine-guns. Force must be used to control those who do not desire and are not ready to help promote the welfare of others, but to just the extent that it must thus be used, to that extent is democracy unrealized, and the Kingdom of the Loving Father incomplete.